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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes a joint session held by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education to hear testimony from Native American tribal elders on their needs and their role in the educational system. Issues and problems were in the areas of: (1) the need for a support system for the elderly; (2) elders as a language, history, and culture resource; (3) elders as a support system for students; (4) facility deficiencies in accessibility for elderly and handicapped persons; (5) overmedication of elderly persons and the need for a holistic approach to wellness and health care; (6) the need for adult day care programs in the community; and (7) the need for culturally appropriate therapy to help elders deal with the grief accumulated during their lives and with substance abuse problems. Also discussed were recommendations for bringing elders into the schools, and effective programs and strategies for elder participation, including tribal health services and meals for the elderly, transporting elders to recreational and cultural activities, elders teaching traditional child rearing practices to teen mothers in school, elders as storytellers in school, intergenerational community service projects involving elders and youth, elders as aides in special education classes, and elders and medicine men serving as advisors in the development of educational philosophy at Navajo Community College. (SV)

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*INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Sessions*
*NIEA 22nd Annual Conference - San Diego, California*
*October 16, 1990*

# "Special Session for Elders"

RC 018554

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**INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Session**
**NIEA 22nd Annual Conference - San Diego, California**
**October 16, 1990**

**Summary: "Special Session for Elders"**

The Special Session for Elders was co-hosted by INAR Task Force member Hayes Lewis and NACIE Council member Buck Martin. The following issues, programs, and recommendations were discussed:

I. **Defining the Needs & Issues**

- The needs of elderly citizens among Indian tribes vary from location to location and the way tribal governments relate to these citizens varies, but there are some common concerns. In some places, there are strong elderly citizens programs including health and other kinds of support services; in other areas they are just beginning to look at those kinds of issues and needs.

  There are many different ways we can interact with our Elders, whether it is to support them in the home, provide opportunities for them to get together, or use them as resource people in our schools and other educational programs.

- I had hoped that there would be Elders here talking about issues back in our communities yet I look around and don't see very many people sitting here and I feel very saddened by that. I would like to share my own personal experience with Elders back home.

  I come from an area of Minnesota where much of our language and culture is lost. I live about 130 miles from my reservation in an urban area in Northern Minnesota. I am the last generation in our family who can speak our language. I cannot speak it fluently, but nevertheless, out of a family of 13 children, I am the only one who speaks the language with my mother. She is now 80 years old and enjoys my visits when I come home because both my husband and I can speak the language with her.

  When we are away, she doesn't have people to talk to. Back home not very many people my age speak the language with their parents. My mother doesn't get out anymore and it is really sad because she feels very alienated. She hasn't been going to pow wows and she used to be an avid pow wow goer. She was a jingle dress dancer and she used to go often to pow wows, but she doesn't do those kinds of things anymore.

  One thing she is involved in is an adult day care program that she goes to two days a week in the town of Deer River. She really enjoys that very much. When I am back home, I go to the rest home where they have the adult day care program and I look around and see all of our Elders sitting with other people with nothing to do. It has saddened my heart because many of these Elders really want to be able to have that link with the culture, and there is nothing for them other than the services provided by the day care program.

- I think in many cases, elderly citizens feel really isolated from their families, relatives, and even friends. So whatever we could do to strengthen and support them, I think we need to do it.

- I am from the Fond Du Lac Reservation in Cloquet, Minnesota. When I listen to this story, it really brings back to me memories of my mother's pain. She was in an orphanage and didn't get treated very nicely and then she went to a Catholic school in Wisconsin. The pain that I am feeling is tied to a lot of insecurities for my mother and a lot of emotion of not feeling loved in these boarding schools.

  Even though it happened many years ago, it is apparent to me that there are a lot of our people in the United States who need to be loved--Elders and younger people--because of the schooling that they have had and the stereotyping that goes along with being an Indian.

  My father died 13 years ago and they were very close, very bonded, very happily married, and very good parents. Now that he is gone, she can't drive and so she goes once a day to the elderly kitchen to have lunch. There is a big gap because we all work and we can't always be there for her.

- I attended a conference last year in Missoula, Montana, sponsored by the National Association of Native American Adult Children of Alcoholics. The conference planners only expected about 150 Indian people to show up, but by the close of the conference almost 700 had come from across the nation to talk about their pain, their abandonment issues, and their grieving, not only from alcoholism, but from multi-generational cultural oppression and cultural genocide.

  While I was there I heard the term "sleeping Elders," and that immediately caught my attention. I came to understand that they were talking about so many of our Elders who have carried the pain of not only multi-generational alcoholism in their families, but they have also carried the helplessness and the hopelessness of the forced assimilation, the boarding schools, and the oppression that has happened to all our people across this country and their inability to do anything about it. So many of our Elders have carried this pain to their graves, our chiefs and our ancestors took it to their graves, and they passed it on to their offspring, until we are here today.

  When I go home to see my mother, she is very quiet and I can just feel the pain around her as I come into the kitchen. She is not able to say anything, but I can see it on her face--the unresolved grief of growing up with abandonment issues and the other things.

- I am from the Bois Forte Reservation, but I am living in Duluth. I teach at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. I too am sad to see so many empty chairs. I can look back at the Elders on my reservation and there are a lot of things that are positive about the different programs we offer.

  The thing that bothers me most is that we don't utilize our Elders as much as we should. We need to understand them as our original teachers. They didn't have to go to school to know the things that they know, and we sometimes overlook the values that they gave us as little children. On our reservation we need to find programs where they feel they can be

useful, helpful people in our communities. Unfortunately there are no monies available where we can involve them as teachers. History on the reservation is nil--nobody knows the history except a few of the Elders.

I went to the University of Minnesota when I was 40 years old, and I am considered an Elder by a number of people, including myself. But back then, in 1982, we had a feast for our Elders and sang songs for them. All of a sudden, one or two of them started talking about the history of our tribe. I keep thinking about that today; I should have brought my tape recorder to the feast that day, because I heard so much history in just that little while, listening to them.

My mother passed away a year ago from the effects of alcoholism, but she used to teach the culture class. There was money appropriated then, but since that time I haven't seen any of our Elder teachers. There aren't that many left now, probably only three of them. What happens when they are gone?

On my reservation, my brother and I are probably the only ones who speak the language fluently and we are the only ones who know the culture and the ceremonies. We are the only ones who know the ways of survival in the woods. We are probably the last generation of traditional Elders. What happens when we go?

We are a lost people all of a sudden. How do we get this back? How do we get our children--the "little sleeping giants"--to wake up? How do we utilize the remaining Elders? Money is the bottom line, I guess--How do we appropriate the money?

- A lot of Elders don't know all the qualities that they have to offer other people, because for so many years they were told that they didn't have any and that they were stupid--and they were treated as such. So when we talk about them giving back, we need to realize that they often don't even know what they can do or if it is important. And in order for them to be able to talk and share their knowledge, we have to help them get rid of the pain they carry. We have to tell them, "Hey, I love you. I think you are important, and I think you have a lot to offer."

Difficulties with Access

- I am from the Lummi Reservation in Bellingham, Washington, and I teach cultural curriculum and cultural arts there. I find that we have trouble getting the Elders to come into our school buildings because there is no access. We do have a senior center and we do take some of our kids over there for lunches and to sing them songs. But we need to realize that access is a serious problem in our schools. If they had to go to the bathroom, or if there were an emergency and we had to get them out real fast, access is an important issue.

- That is a really important concern. In recent years there has been a lot of legislation designed to improve accessibility of public buildings. In Zuni we are building an elementary school, and you would be surprised how much extra it costs to put in all of the necessary accessibility features. But it is for good reason which includes access for handicapped citizens, and those who are a little bit older and having a hard time.

Medication vs Holistic Health Approach

- I am a tribal member from Fort Belknap in Montana. It is important to consider that Elders are often filled with medication for arthritis and other ailments. So when we explore the whole issue of Elders, it is important that we look at the concept of wellness through nutrition and exercise as well as medication. It is almost as if IHS fosters their dependence on medication. So I think we need to take a holistic approach that is comprehensive and focuses on health as well as illness.

- This is an important point because so many of our Elders end up in a drugged state. My mother is a diabetic and has to have certain kinds of pills. We ended up cutting the dosage in half and our mother just kind of "woke up." I think that pharmacy and IHS people generally don't realize that elderly citizens cannot metabolize chemicals the way younger people can.

II. **Recommendations**

- I would like to propose that we establish our own adult day care programs back in our communities. If we don't want to go as far as proposing a nursing home, then we should look at the kinds of services an adult day care center can offer our people. We could operate it from a cultural perspective. It would be so nice if the young people could come in there and start learning their language again from the old people who have these things to share. I believe that we would fill a gap this way and help stop the cultural genocide that has taken place. People of my generation need to have more of a link with the older people.

- I think something should be set up, wherever it comes from, so that more Elders can be picked up on a more frequent basis. I realize that there is a money crunch, but out of respect for our Elders and all the love they have given us, we have to give back a little more as they get older. They should feel that they are very loved. We should give them means of communication, whether it is a bus that can pick them up, or some kind of counseling support to help them release their pain. It is hard for them to talk to us as children even though we try pretty hard to help them.

  I know that money is always going to be the question. But so much is spent on so many idiotic things in our country, if we can't spend money on our Elders, then it is a darn shame.

- We really need to take responsibility to help our Elders deal with all of their grieving. Back home, in urban areas and on the reservation, I see many, many, many of our people walking the street intoxicated. My heart really saddens for them because I know that they have not healed yet in their heart about the issues that we have grown up with. We need to provide some kinds of therapy programs and activities to help our Elders talk about and address these issues.

- A lot of times it is hard to do something about a problem when you look at the larger issues and maybe depend on somebody else. When we talk about the tribe or some agency doing something about a problem, to some degree we are taking responsibility for personal action away from ourselves.

I think, more and more, that we need to teach our children that if something is going to happen for our elderly citizens, then it first must start with direct action and concern on a personal level.

In my own situation, my mother is a diabetic and has to get dialyzed three times a week. There are a number of citizens in Zuni who have to do this and they have a hard time. Many times it is our own Indian people who are working with our elderly citizens who fail to be alert to situations and respond to them.

For instance, they were expecting these people, right after they get off the dialysis machine, to walk what amounts to about half a block to the pharmacy to get their medication, when the staff could far more easily have gotten the medicine for them and taken it over to them. We observed this situation; I went into the service unit director and said, "Look, here is a problem. Why don't you come look at it and see what our Zuni staff at the IHS hospital can do to help these people out?" They are in a weakened condition. One old lady had a walker. That kind of attitude and treatment of elderly people is criminal. I was told it would take too much for someone to come in to take care of it. We argued that they should make the young people get out from behind the pharmacy counter and come over to give these people their medicine. It is the least they can do considering how much these Elders have given us.

So it often begins with little things. As Indian people we always say that we respect and value our elderly citizens, but generally when you look out there with the tribal groups, we don't practice what we preach.

I believe that in Indian communities or wherever we have our elderly citizens, we have to really make a commitment to look after their concerns and needs. We have to make this a priority, just as sometimes tribes have to make education of younger children a priority.

I would like to recommend that we intensify efforts to bring youth and Elders together. Many Elders feel that they won't provide the information or pass on the knowledge unless those young people show an interest.

I know myself, I wasn't interested in my culture back in my early 20s. I was into materialism and those kinds of things. My mother didn't openly share her wealth of information. But since I have gotten older and more mature, I have found my identity. I have been asking her many, many questions, I have shown an interest, and I have discovered--after sharing this with my husband--that many Elders are like my mother and will share information when youth are interested.

So I would like to see programs in the schools and in communities where youth can connect with Elders, and our legacy, our traditions, and our culture can be passed on. Today, our youth are so into hairdos and rock music. If someone puts on a pow wow tape, they say,"Oh, turn that pow wow tape off and turn on that rock music." They don't want to listen to the Elders, so we need to empower our youth to be able to connect with their traditions.

The Elders are an ideal group in the community to help students verify and validate who they are and where they come from. When I do culturally relevant curriculum workshops, I tell the teachers, "You know, not to over-simplify the process of putting culturally relevant

materials into the curriculum, but if you can replicate the child's home in the classroom you are making your curriculum culturally relevant."

There are various ways of doing that. For instance, through a language experience approach method of teaching language arts, you can get the students to relate what they know through pictures, through giving them a chance to reflect on experiences they've had, draw pictures, write stories, and then read each other's stories. I have seen schools where children were learning to read in first grade from their own stories that they wrote. They were the authors. Where the Elders came in is that they are the people who, in place of textbook publishers, come in and validate what the children are doing in regard to what is going on in the home.

Another method many people use is to have the Elders come in and talk to the kids, tell them stories, and so forth. This is great, but I think Elders can be used beyond that. They can come in and see what the children are doing, they can validate it, reinforce it, and even model for the children better things to do.

A lot of new research in effective language arts instruction is telling us not to correct children's grammar; that their word usage, sentence structure, and pronunciation will naturally evolve. So Elders can be used to model correct language for children who are working on learning their Native language.

We do need to brief Elders when we use them as paraprofessionals or language instructors. We mainly need to encourage them to be themselves. It is common to go into a school and presume there is an order already there, that somebody in a real holy place has invented "the American education system." But that isn't true; it evolved by accident. So Elders need to be encouraged to go in there and dream and do what they want to do--what they think is right.

Sometime I would like to take 100 people, selected at random, and take a series of topics and ask them to forget the research and the theory and come up with ideas of what they think would work best for, say, grades K through 2 language arts instruction. I would bet dollars to donuts--or dollars to fry bread--that you would come out with really creative action plans.

I am Oglala and I am on the faculty at MIT. I have a very select and gifted group of approximately 34 Native American students. I often ask them when they arrive to what they attribute their success at being accepted in such a competitive program. Almost consistently, across the board, they say something that I find true in my own personal experience. This is that we have one key relative--usually a grandparent--who encourages us when no one else does and who has very high expectations of us in spite of all the things that seem to impede our path to a competitive career. There is some grandpa or grandma back home who says, "Well, go for it. Try it!"

I would like to see some sort of telecommunication, or video communication by satellite perhaps, between the few best and brightest with our grandparents back home, because I think it is very important for the Elders to realize the contribution they make whether they understand physics, chemistry, or any of the experiences we are having with the curriculum at these schools. They need to know that in the beginning, they set the foundation that gave

us the strength to carry through when other people didn't realize what kinds of achievements we were capable of.

This year I am particularly enlightened because I have a majority of students who are reservation born and educated, and we had our first full-blood who was accepted by early action, got 800 on his math SAT, and is on honor roll. Probably one-third of the Native students at MIT are in honors classes and graduating with phenomenal research projects. We just graduated a mechanical engineering student who was raised by his grandparents and graduated with honors. Even though he was offered a full scholarship to go to graduate school and every competitive engineering firm was interviewing him for a job, he chose to go back to Navajo country so he could have some interaction with his family and the community because he felt so depleted from his isolation in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I just think it would be of benefit to us to have an ongoing conversation with the people back home. This would also allow our Elders to see and share our experiences via telecommunication, even if it were just a video of students going from recitation lab to other campus activities they enjoy. This would close the gap between the past and the future and share our successes with our Elders so they will realize how effective they have been.

## III. Programs and Strategies that Work

I am reminded of the Winnebago tribe in Wisconsin where the tribal government has gotten actively involved and is using existing community custom and culture to address problems. In particular, they had invited me to address a summer youth camp program. There were speakers and there were also Elders there. Some were donating their time as cooks, as counselors, or just being available. I also saw that youth would tend to go over and spend time talking with them.

There is a hereditary chief for the tribe who attends all functions despite his age and his own health problems. He will be out there and he is honored as he brings his culture to nearly every tribal activity because that is what their tradition dictates.

I also saw the tribal chairman, whom I suspect is an Elder in his own right, but he defers to the Elders of his community and to the hereditary chief, showing them great respect. He acknowledges and ensures that the elected council addresses the problems of the elderly and involves Elders in all aspects of tribal policy and decision-making as resource people.

They also have a very strong health program there, where they provide medical services and transportation for the elderly. They have a fitness program. One woman from the University of Wisconsin wanted to come in and do aerobics with the elderly and when she came back, they were singing '49s and they had jingled, and that was their aerobics. The aerobics were changed and done in a fashion that was consistent with the culture.

They have Meals on Wheels to feed elderly and they ensure that those who can't make it in to the center have their meals taken out to them.

I know of one white man who was married to an Indian. He is in his 70s. His wife died and after a respectful amount of time had passed, the chief went to visit him and said, "Alvin, are you going back to your people, or are you going to stay with us?" Alvin had thought that he would have to leave and no longer be part of that circle. But the Elders considered him a part of that circle. He nearly cried, because after all of those years of having lived in the community and being married to an Indian woman, he finally realized that he was accepted by them. So they bring tribal health services and meals to this white man.

There are a lot of pow wows, community birthdays, and potluck kinds of things. They also plan extra activities. They took two vans down to the Ice Capades at the Dane County Coliseum, which is about 45 miles away. It was great to see these elderly people getting out to see this event. The next one they wanted to go to was the World Wrestling Federation.

It was physical activity, mental activity, caring, and providing that kind of support network. I think this gets at what you were talking about. If we believe that we are empowered to do something, whether or not we have the money, we will find a way. We will just have to devote our time to it.

In Zuni, with our tribally controlled situation and our school located right in the community, we have developed some intergenerational opportunities. We have a program called "Zuni Young Families" where we bring young women who are pregnant or have had children (and their spouses) back into school to continue their education. It includes a day care situation, which is an education child care lab and parenting program that goes along with the academics. An integral part of this is to bring in elderly citizens to impart their knowledge, experience, and teachings of proper child raising practices. They share the tribally acceptable ways and philosophy for child rearing.

As in other tribes, there are periods of time during the year when it is appropriate to talk about the tribal history and legends. Our time for this is in the late fall through winter, and it is the only time that we can talk about it. So we get elderly citizens to come in and share storytelling activities with the young children. We bring together the children, young parents, and Elders for a potluck meal. We recognize the Elders who will be giving the storytelling that week, and we audio and videotape them. Then the young parents themselves take those tapes to our tribally owned community educational FM station and they play them on the radio so others can hear them.

As part of our Youth Leadership Program, we also have community service projects for kids at different grade levels. Many of those projects involve working with elderly citizens, restoring the traditional ovens or building new ones, and other cultural activities. You don't just go out and build an oven. There are prayers that you have to say and offerings you have to make as you are building it, and that is information that the older people can give the younger people. So when they reach the age where they are going to build their own ovens in support of our tribal ceremonies and religion, they will know exactly how to do it. All of this is taking place in our language, and it is really good to see this type of interaction.

Our school district and the tribe have a wellness center, and we are looking at tribal wellness as a way of overcoming some of the issues of alcohol and substance abuse for both children

and Elders. As part of the wellness program, we have special time periods where elderly citizens can come and use the gyms in our schools. This includes an adapted weight training program they can go through. This program brings them together with high school age kids.

There are a variety of ways that Elders can be involved with young people and they generate a really special kind of energy that goes back and forth; it creates a sense of respect for these citizens who have given so much to us.

In all of our special education programs we have elderly people involved along with our teachers and aides. There are many ways that elderly citizens can help look after the needs of exceptional children and support their efforts. We find those children to be more responsive to Elders in many ways, especially the ones that are severely disabled or physically handicapped.

I teach at Navajo Community College and we recently adopted a philosophy that was drawn from our Navajo way of life. I did the primary research on this and interviewed many people to learn the methodologies, the prayers, the songs, and to be able to see the organization of knowledge and what the purpose of life is.

The four areas that they recommend to achieve balance and be happy have to do with (1) the value of one's strength, (2) the ability to provide for oneself, (3) the ability to get along with others, and (4) one's relationship to the environment. These four areas are necessary, just as air, water, and the basic elements are necessary to plants. If you upset the balance of any one of these, it creates an imbalance in an individual. Within this belief structure, they usually bring in a medicine man to restore a person to balance.

When my findings went before the Navajo Community College Board of Regents, they recognized the validity of the traditional organization of knowledge and they adopted this philosophy. We are using it to reorganize the academic programs and to integrate the curriculum. This philosophy was also reviewed by the Navajo Native Medicine Man Association. It was presented to them several times, they have made recommendations and suggestions, and they have given us a resolution for the College.

In the organizational structures, identification of knowledge, and reorganizing the disciplines, we really utilized our Elders. Right now we are also working with them as resource people to help us redesign the courses we are teaching. So they are a very viable group in our academic programs at the college.

The philosophy also went into a lot of schools on the reservation, across the Navajo Nation. So some schools have adopted the same basic philosophy and are turning to their Elders to help them organize and develop their own academic programs.

So we are using that approach within our education system, and we have found a lot of things we could do to correct problems in the American education system. The most important thing we determined was that if we were going to educate our youth and turn the problems around, we would have to go back to our Elders and bring back the values and truths that have been tested by time. It seems to be working so far.

In the Navajo Nation we are using the substance abuse curriculum project to help students in grades K through 12 on the reservation. Within the Head Start programs, we are trying to touch all the bases with our Navajo youth, so they will know what it is to be in balance.

## IV. Other Issues

When we use the term "education," we usually refer to the organized systems of education sponsored by the BIA or the public schools. But all of the Native groups that I have come into contact with in my travels had educational approaches long before we were subjected to the mainstream system. Whether I am in Barrow, Alaska, or Torreon, New Mexico--where I started out in Indian education in the 1960s--I find that in spite of the school system, people are able to carry on their ways. As educators, we are missing out on a tremendous resource.

I think school board members have an obligation, when the school system isn't working for your children, to raise objections and do something about it. Demand that things be changed. The way it can be redesigned or refocused already exists to a certain extent in our traditional educational approaches.

I have taught beginners. While I was a Head Start director, I worked with Head Start teachers. I have taught beginners myself, taught middle school, high school, and college. But I have had to stop and examine what I was doing. I was basically trying to open the head and pour in information. I realized we never ask students what they already know. I think we need to do this through activities.

I honestly believe that if you replicate a child's first three or four years of experience in the home, in the classroom all the way through 12th grade, that child will be better prepared to be a good thinker, a good problem solver, and to have all of the reading, and writing skills in English and other languages. This would be motivated by the traditional education system.

## V. Coming Full Circle

I guess I am an Elder now, since I am a grandpa twice. I see the need to save some of our culture and some of our history. Even today as they are rapidly passing away, I look back and think of a person who taught me something, and they are gone. Somehow, we must get these things documented. We must document their words and their expressions and their images, so the children can see what they looked like.

I see my grandmother in her late 80s and she has lost a lot of her memory, but I remember many of the things she told me. The other grandmother has been gone for a long time, but she taught me how to look for different plants. You know, we don't get that in our school system. We have to go back into our schools, bring these Elders to teach the children what the plants are, what the days mean, what the water is for. There is little respect anymore. We need to utilize our Elders.

Sure there is a lot of alcoholism and drug addiction and trauma out there. Our parents and grandparents and their parents were traumatized, placed on reservations, placed in boarding schools as if they were prisoners of war. We need to have counseling in these areas. But we need to utilize what we have today. Our ceremonies need to be put in our schools to show our children how important they are, to help them grow and to know that they aren't alone.

You can put a kid who has been traumatized in a whole room of kids the same age and he will still feel alone. Until I found out who I was and what I meant as a human being, I felt alone. It was my grandmothers and my grandfathers who told me I was not alone and I always looked up to them. As I go on in my life I remember them every day.

I still remember my father--he was an alcoholic. He died an alcoholic death because he didn't know how to be a human being. Those are tragedies. My children will not know their grandfather, nor their uncles who have passed on. And I hope to God I am around so my grandchildren will know me.

We need something--we need the funding--to lift these grandparents up out of poverty. If you go to my reservation you will find that they live here on a measly grant. We don't have enough care facilities for them, or vehicles to get around. Some are alcoholics. They are left out on the streets. We have forgotten how to take care of ourselves and we need to get those skills back. We need to have respect and love each other again. These were taken away from us, but slowly they are coming back.

The ceremonies are slowly coming back. I myself learned a few years ago what it was like to be in a sweat lodge. This summer I participated in my first sun dance. It has changed my life. Before, I was always on this road to get rich, never getting there because, as I have heard before, only one percent of America holds all the money--so you can never get there. So I'm just going to learn how to be happy, and that is what we need to teach our children. Learn to be yourself--you don't hear that.